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ULTRABLACK LANDSCAPES

PHILOFICTION BLACKNESS, LANDSCAPES, NATURE, ULTRABLACK

Let's take a look at Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Monk by the Sea*: the seemingly infernal blackness that covers the earth does not come from the sky but seems to rise from a black sea that is recognizable only by the whitecaps on some waves. The clouds break over the scene, revealing a light-blue band of sky. At high altitude, however, they seem to reflect the torn black haze below. Such a landscape, closed in on itself, presents an eerie scene to the viewer, who looks into an almost-nothingness and yet not a void.

There are other paintings in which there is no horizon or sky. In Georges Braque's *Landscape*, the stony heaviness of the landscape mutates into black canyon-like chasms. The absence of distance, expanse, and height – though not of depth and surface – is not

represented here not by an atmospheric veiling but by an impenetrable angular force that flickers upward like rigid flames. Depth is revealed in the confinement and crowding of the pictorial elements, in their cracks and crevices. Such images can turn into visions of terror, in which the landscape begins to dissolve into the concrete canyons of the metropolis.

Landscapes are by definition uninhabitable, impassable, unusable – unmanageable. Human beings don't live on a land surface as they would on a stable platform, nor do they live in a landscape that is perceived as a kind of vessel. Landscape is never where the earth touches us directly and familiarly, providing us with an unyielding base and a source of support, letting us feel solid ground under our feet. Sensations of this kind always refer to only one place, surrounded by other places. But in landscapes, we are enraptured and on our way to where no one has gone; here, the creation of places and paths is always a step toward transforming landscapes into territories.

On the other hand, we live not only as if we were randomly wandering vagabonds, but also lingering as we pass, where the landscape hospitably captures us without granting us power or a right over it. This hospitality, however, must not be equated with kindness; it does not mean that the landscape pampers us, as if it were Mother Earth and we were children, freed from need, want, and desire, experiencing its laughing sunshine and blue skies over summer meadows – pure enjoyment. Indeed, landscapes can also be inhospitable hosts, threatening our lives with earthquakes and avalanches, floods and fires, storms, heat and cold.

Landscapes, in the sense of their untouched appearance, have nothing to do with an aesthetics of well-being, which is only about physical and psychological health. And the modes of existence of the scenic space exceed the spatial scales oriented to human beings. From the disturbances, injuries, and unholiness of landscapes and territories arises the holiness of landscapes and territories. Whoever wants to live simply enjoying a landscape is thrown back to a mere piece of land.

Past cultures were aware of this and sought to do justice in their works to the vulnerable beauty of landscapes, whether they were comfortable and pleasing or not. With modernity began the straightening of paths and the degradation of soils, and with it the robbing of landscapes' wildness and blackness through the addiction to ever greater wealth and capital, an addiction that spread like a cancer. Tourism, impelled by the urbanized masses' banal desire for landscape, completely destroys what it claims to love. Thus, when we look at images of the pre-modern landscape, we cannot help but mourn the loss of landscapes in which even the inevitable wounds that people inflicted on their surfaces could turn into scars, so that these people and their works could themselves belong to the features of a landscape.

We are far from being on the way to an untamed landscape when we create green spaces in cities or declare special areas "reserves" and put them under conservation. Urban metropolises and their landscape networks would first have to open up again to that which eludes what they desire: the essence of landscapes, to which they owe their own existence. The view of the landscape, as shown in great paintings, is above all a view of the ways of being of wildness, with its unavailable horizons. Now, we can debate whether landscape can exist as a spatial vessel that is completely empty of material being. To this day it is said,

ambiguously, that space is free when there is nothing there. Space itself, and not only spatiality, seems to be found primarily where free space is opened by the absence of being. But it is precisely then that the free turns into mere spatial emptiness, which can be taken up, occupied, and cleared again. Free space and the freedom of the landscape, however, show that the essence of space results not from emptiness or fullness in relation to a vessel, but from the absolutely unavailable free and open.

It is not enough to understand landscapes as components of a peaceful nature that sometimes expresses itself violently in floods, fires, droughts, glaciations, and so on. These manifestations go far beyond what constitutes the supposed totality of nature as *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, because we also know about the landscapes of black holes, black matter, black energies, and dark strings. To the shape of these respective landscape phenomena, which can be opened at and from horizons, belong the hidden and the secrets of their still undecided possibilities as well as the ways of a non-omnipresent.

Horizons also include the paths of a non-present space; they elude all calculability and measurability and yet are not lost in the infinite. It is the paths of horizons that seem to imaginarily both limit and delimit landscapes without dissolving into the unbounded. Landscapes are precisely where the totality of an omnipresent nature is insufficient to achieve their aesthetic. As imaginary things, landscapes are not totally and absolutely present, for their presence stems from the absence of an encounter with the familiar. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Landscape is foreign to us, and we are fearfully alone amongst trees which blossom and streams which flow." Yet it is precisely this foreignness, which can never be appropriated, that enables us to encounter landscapes anew again and again. The alienation of global landscapes, whether they suffer from loneliness or togetherness or delight, gives us temporary meaning. It may well be that the landscape of previous cultures is transformed into a completely different landscape, without our being able to identify the precise boundary between the two. When darkness descends or heavy rain or snow begins to fall from gloomy clouds, when rising fog, swirling dust, heavy smoke, or a violent storm suddenly impairs and finally obstructs the view of the landscape, observers first become aware of a condition that they had tacitly assumed: the clear, calm, and bright view of things at a certain position of the sun. Even if one speaks of lunar or Martian landscapes or of landscapes on Saturn's satellite Taurus, on which, at ninety-four degrees below zero, the gases move like rivers and surface water is solidified to stone-like ice and hollowed out into valleys and gorges – even then, in the everyday conception of a stretch of land, the clear and bright view of the landscape is included as a condition of its existence.

Finally, the relationship between landscape and music invites us to explore the temporality of landscapes by walking, biking, or driving, and today also by flying (and in this respect the change in view is also technically conditioned). At the same time, the musicality of landscapes ties in with ancient Pythagorean thought, in which the laws of the tonal relations of the entire cosmos were set forth. Music touches the landscape through its moods. To make the voice resonate was the task, usually with the aim of creating harmony and agreement with other voices. The verb "to voice" gained wide acceptance in musical practice in the sixteenth century. After all, on the basis of previously determined pitch intervals and a chosen key, it was necessary to harmonize the polyphonic singing voices and, more generally, the

interplaying sounds of the instruments.

At the same time, from the point of view of music theory, “tunings” have always been understood as measured – that is, through tuning – and disagreements – detunings and mistunings – are kept as far away as possible. One could then describe the entire corpus of musical pieces, with their rhythms, melodies, and harmonies, as “tuning.” From tunings were derived the various “emotional moods,” which would be triggered, for example, by major or minor keys. In the late eighteenth century, “mood” was also transferred to landscapes, in the sense that they, just like pieces of music, could elicit certain emotions.

Dark landscapes may be gloom, murkiness, shadow, or shade. They may be dusk, night, or twilight. But there is another kind of darkness. No longer simply dark, the question now is that of a profound blackness (ultrablack) – the generic darkness of the abyss, the void and vacuum, the darkness of more than silence, of catastrophe and cataclysm. It is a cosmological blackness, the black of absolute evil, the black of non-being. Such blackness is a world without us. Nature understood in such a way, with an area not limited to Earth but constituting everything in the cosmos, is revealed as the territory of the extra-human other. What had been rejected as merely “empty space” returns at the same time as the open and free space of landscapes.

Text for *The Other Landscapes*, a multi-faceted digital art exhibition at *Expression* art gallery.

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